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DISMOUNTED SAPPERS OF V CORPS' 1ST ARMORED DIVISION TAKE ON KARBALA'S MEAN STREETS

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KARBALA, Iraq – The late-morning skies were overcast and a breeze blew through the trees. The air was cooler than usual. The order came over the radio for the troops to dismount.

The combat engineers from V Corps' B Company, 16th Engineer Battalion, 1st Armored Division, piled out of their M113 armored personnel carriers and onto this city's wide streets.

Following behind M1A1 Abrams tanks, squads took staggered positions on either side of the avenue. The tanks' engines bathed the combat engineers with blast-furnace heat from their exhaust vents. So much for the cool weather.

The Soldiers' tactical march up the ruined Karbala street was short in terms of distance -- perhaps only two kilometers -- but lengthy in time. Tanks, M113s and Soldiers slowly closed on the area where they had encountered resistance in the days before.

"Recon by fire" was the engineers' mission, explained Sgt. 1st Class James Flum, a B Company platoon sergeant.

"When the tanks are rolling, if they see something that looks (like an improvised explosive device) they will put a few rounds in it." Flum said once the IED has been disabled, the engineers step in. "That's when they'll call us forward to place some C-4 (plastic explosive) and blow it in place" he said. "It's an excellent process, and it works every time."

The tanks turned off to another area of the vacant neighborhood, but two squads of engineers and three M113s continued moving forward on their reconnaissance patrol.

Pushing further into the city, the Soldiers heard the quick cracking report of enemy rifle fire. As the Soldiers took cover, the walls opposite their position erupted in tiny puffs of dust.

Snipers had been laying in wait.

The dismounted Soldiers and their tracked vehicles turned their weapons to the structures across the street. The enemy shooters were very close, but didn't seem to have the skill or nerve to hold an aim long enough to hit any of the Soldiers. The large-caliber weapons on the tracks answered the snipers' first strike with a roar.

The Soldiers paid close attention to any movement or suspected sniper perches.

Spc. Angel Ramos, a tracked vehicle commander, said he knows what he needs to do in a firefight.

"I started laying some suppressive fire down the alleyway, while (the dismounted Soldiers) were trying to get into the vehicle."

Spc. Snowden Neill, a combat engineer, also laid down covering fire for his comrades.

"I carry a (Squad Automatic Weapon)," he said. "I have to put down suppression. I look for something that would be ideal for a sniper's spot."

If the engineers could not kill the sniper, at least they would deny him any advantageous positions to occupy. The column systematically assailed windows, balconies and rooftops. As angry rifles barked, the drapes in one of the suspected windows caught fire and smoke poured from the building.

Backing out of the "kill zone," the patrol met with their company's main body and left the area. No more shots were heard.

Afterward the Soldiers laughed about their close call. But they know they were in a serious situation, said Ramos.

"At least everybody came out safe, and there were no injuries, so it was a good day," he said.

